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ABSTRACT

The importance of understanding and responding to cultural differences in the college classroom is discussed after acknowledging diversity in the types of institutions and missions in U.S. higher education. It is noted that the issues have moved beyond concern for equal educational opportunity to adequacy of educational attainment of entrants. Developing understanding of cultural differences and their impact on behavior and learning styles has begun in various ways at colleges, including the integration of multicultural education in teacher education programs. Enhancement of classroom climate and attention to cultural pluralism through recognition of learner differences, as well as in changing instructional patterns, are substantial problems facing individual faculty members. Specific concerns include: the need for minority role models among faculty and the staff who provide support services; sociocultural variables related to Hispanic American culture; stereotypes and myths about Chicano students; the relationship of foreign teaching assistants to the diverse domestic cultures; and skills essential for effective teaching. (SW)

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THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM: CHANGING CLIMATES AND CULTURES

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The diversity among institutions of higher education in the United States is unmatched in any other nation in the world. This diversity is related to the responsiveness of higher education to the society in which it exists, and according to some, for its high level of performance. Not only does diversity exist among institutions but there are varieties of educational missions and goals within institutions. Accommodation of those diverse goals within multipurpose institutions is of particular concern.

The major purposes of contemporary higher education, such as those developed by the Carnegie Commission, for increased student development, human capability, educational justice, advancement of learning and evaluation of society enjoy rather universal support and approval at general levels.[1] When institutions attempt to define specific goals for programs, however, inconsistencies and contradictions appear.

At the individual college or division level there are environmental pressures in conflict. These pressures tend to act to reduce levels of diversity by demanding certain high levels of performance toward predetermined goals. At the same time there is recognition of pressure for serving the needs and orientations of the ever broadening society.

Population shifts, increases in community colleges and their enrollments, and changes in political environment - particularly at the state level - have strong potential impact for colleges and their classrooms. For example, the increase in population of Hispanic-Americans in the Southwest is at a rate that will affect society on a broad scale.

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A logical expectation might be that even more broadly diverse programs would be developing, on a national scale. Flora Ortiz, for example, has noted that the United States has become a national society, and that problems of equity are not likely to be resolved at the local level.[2] There have been prestigious reports earlier (such as Newmans in 1971) which criticized decreasing diversity, insensitivity to minority students and women, depersonalization and high attrition rates. Several of those reports (e.g. Carnegie, Non-Traditional Study) were focused upon improved service to learners. There is, then, some national recognition of and concern for meeting the needs of culturally diverse students. These needs, however, sometimes seem to run head-on into intensified concern for improving academic quality. This may be complicated by competition for new students, partly as a means of institutional survival. Dr. Kenneth Mortimer, one of the authors of the 1984 National Institute of Education report, Involvement In Learning has stressed the value of greater access to higher education, and has noted that equity means access to quality programs.[3] In a recent lecture he emphasized also that "Quality can be attained in diverse educational contexts." While the diverse contexts Mortimer referred to may have been at the unit or institutional level, they are also needed at the program or classroom level. Most institutions, programs and classrooms now have students who reflect varied backgrounds. Many of those students are of minority backgrounds, with cultural and social histories different from their classmates.

While minorities seem to be underrepresented in total undergraduate enrollments and in many areas of study, minority students may be more likely to attend college than non-minority students of some level of academic achievements and socioeconomic status.[4] For Texas, recent data on enrollment

and degree patterns show considerable underrepresentation for Hispanics and Blacks at all levels of post secondary education, and that the greatest population growth over the next twenty years will take place among these populations.[5]

The total numbers of minority students are increasing, however, and the concern for changing classroom climates is thereby intensified. The remainder of this paper focuses upon needs and approaches for faculty to be made aware of cultural differences in their classrooms, and of qualities and competences needed for effective teaching.

Critical issues revolve about developing instructional programs particularly suited to somewhat homogeneous groups within larger, more heterogeneous settings. The issues seem to have moved beyond just concern for equal educational opportunity or access to higher education to adequacy of educational attainment by those who have accomplished entry.

The groups, even though stereotyping is often unfair, seem to be identifiable, as are some of their needs. Foreign students, for example, may need development of classroom language skills. Sociocultural variables for groups of foreign students as well as of domestic students need recognition and further study by those in higher education. The culture and linguistic abilities of foreign teaching assistants is of significant concern. Some of those instructors, trained in other systems, seem to involve themselves less than native instructors in give and take communication with other students. The impact of those behaviors needs further study, and provides another dimension of multicultural educational needs. The relationships of the other cultured foreign students or teachers with our diverse domestic cultures is apparently an unresearched area.

There are many and more narrow elements which could be researched (and in some cases have been). These include differential treatment by instructors of women and minorities with regard to such things as eye contact, types of questions asked, and expected responses.[6] Socio cultural variables, such as fatalism, present orientation and familialism as related to Hispanic American culture, for example, need recognition and study by higher education faculty. The stereotypes and myths about Chicano students have aroused concern, particularly as relate to learning styles. García, and others, rightfully note that development of information on personal cognitive styles is also important.[7] Learning-style awareness could assist the students in relating their unique backgrounds to develop their learning process.

Development of understanding of cultural differences and their impact on behavior and learning styles has begun in a variety of ways in various institutions. For example, Eastern New Mexico University at Portales, in 1980 began a commitment to multicultural education in its teacher education program. The recognition of the pluralistic nature of the schools was important to establishing goals for meeting differences - not only in ability - but in the way in which students learn. The University has evidenced its commitment to goal attainment through an ongoing series of seminars, workshops and professional meetings related to integrating multicultural concepts into courses.[8]

College course planning must also take into account learner characteristics, course content, the process of delivery, and evaluation. The context and classroom climate in which instruction and learning takes place is undoubtedly important. Enhancement of the classroom climate and

attention to cultural pluralism through recognition of learner differences, as well as in changing instructional patterns are substantial problems facing individual faculty members.

The "atmospheres" of institutions need to be accepting and supportive for students to work toward and achieve their potential. Supportive programs are frequently mentioned in the literature as being beneficial. Basic financial aid is also important to provide means for many to participate in higher education. The atmosphere for individual students may be affected by their concerns for funds for subsistence, much less for participation in the variety of activities which exist on the campuses.

Garcia and his co-authors have emphasized the need for minority role models among faculty and staff in higher education.[9] At the same time they note the lack of such individuals. They note the need for support services for Hispanic students to be provided by Hispanic staff. A study at the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee also noted the limited role models for young black students to emulate.[10] Particular attention to instructional techniques needs to be developed even if role models do not provide the teaching. Flora Ortiz has stated, for example, that history may be taught more effectively - to Hispanic Americans - if Hispanic participation is included.[11]

There are a number of approaches to meeting the changing culture of the classroom. And we should remember that the climate is not entirely culture dependent. There is substantial concern that female students in many classrooms are treated differently than their male counterparts. These concerns apparently are not subject matter specific, that is, climate and cultural impact varies because of individual faculty behaviors rather than because of subject or course content.

Faculty members need to continue to pay attention to cultural differences in their classrooms. In addition, questions related to what constitutes effective teaching must be studied. Attention must be given to those qualities and competencies considered essential for effective teaching, which include such time honored elements as respect for human personality, understanding of social behaviors, understanding and skill in human relations. Sufficient general and specialized knowledge, and competence in goal setting and in evaluation must continue to be stressed.

The importance of classroom climate and the recognition of the multiple facets of cultural pluralism is yet at a stage in which awareness must be developed throughout higher education faculty. As faculty we might do well to recall an adage which suggests that many students "don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Perhaps through care - and study - we can address cultural change and cultural differences in the classroom through improved and enlightened climate for learning.

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